

February 16, 2016

**Committee on Children Public Hearing Testimony
HB 5140 AN ACT CONCERNING THE USE OF THERAPY ANIMALS TO COMFORT
CHILDREN TESTIFYING IN CERTAIN CRIMINAL PROSECUTIONS**

Dear members of the Committee on Children,

I am writing IN SUPPORT of H.B. 5140.

I am a member of Tails of Joy, Inc., an all-volunteer animal assisted therapy group serving Hartford, Tolland and Windham counties that was established in 1995 to provide therapy visits with dogs and other animals to those who need comfort or company in settings such as assisted living facilities, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, veterans groups and college and school campuses. Upon the passing of my only child in 2010, I experienced firsthand the comforting empathy and love of my two golden retrievers. In fact, anytime my dog, Angus heard me crying he would come find me and sit with me and offer me his soft fur to cry into. As time passed and knowing how my dogs helped me, I decided to utilize my dog, Apollo as a therapy dog. In 2013, at just shy of 2 years old, Apollo and I became a registered therapy dog team. Since then, we have provided approximately 200 visits to Hartford Hospital's Institute of Living (IOL) inpatient child and adolescent units, an additional 30 visits to a local elementary school and several college campus visits. In 2014 we received Crisis Response Team training and evaluation through Tails of Joy and have since participated in three call-outs involving adolescents and young adults.

Resulting from these visits, we have amassed approximately 600 interactions with patients on the IOL child unit which provides inpatient behavioral health care to children between the ages of 5 and 12 and 1200 interactions with patients on the adolescent unit. While I am not privy to confidential patient information, **I have repeatedly and consistently witnessed immediate changes in patients' demeanor and affect upon their interacting with Apollo. You may wonder why the therapy dogs are so effective. My short answer is: they don't talk - but they listen.** This past November I was a bit more long winded regarding this issue in a speech I delivered to a middle school audience. I have attached the speech as part of my testimony since it provides additional evidence of how a registered therapy dog team can have a positive impact on a child's emotions. **In conclusion, from what I've witnessed during Apollo's 2,000+ interactions with children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 17, having a therapy dog team present to comfort a child during certain court appearances would not only benefit the child but may allow the child to better articulate their testimony.**

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

Karen Noel-Freda
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Member and Crisis Response Team, Tails of Joy, Inc.

Good morning,

Thank you for allowing us to be a part of your Thanksgiving Service again. This is the sixth year that we are here to present the Nicole Noel Freda Memorial Scholarship to a student who demonstrates kindness, helpfulness and integrity with a warm smile and a faithful and happy heart. My husband, Mr. Freda presented the first 3 years and my niece, Miss Montano, presented the past 2 years – tough acts to follow. So, I brought the dog.

In preparing for today, I prayed. I asked Nicole for guidance and my goal became to deliver a message from Nicole to you. However, I feel first and foremost that she had a message for me, “Mom, DON’T lecture them! Just talk about Apollo and tell them to be kind.” Okay, I get it! I’ll talk about Apollo’s work and the kindness and compassion he demonstrates during his visits and, as a result, the difference he makes in people’s lives.

First, a little background about his name: I’m into the meaning of names. So, when I started exploring names for this fluffy, rambunctious pup that was soon to join our family, I knew that I wanted to name him in honor of Nicole but I didn’t want it to be obvious. Since I called her Sunshine and she enjoyed mythology, I started exploring names that related to the Sun. I first came up with Ra, the Egyptian God of the Sun and added Ray to it since Nicole is a ray of sunshine.

However, when calling my fluffy rambunctious pup as he swiftly explored his new surroundings, I heard RAYRAH, RAYRAH, RAYRAH (in Scooby Doo voice) and I started to laugh. I sounded like Scooby Doo.

Fortunately, I was introduced to the name Apollo, the Greek God of Sunlight, Healing, Music and Poetry and since our 3rd day together he has been known as such.

Apollo is now a 4 year old golden retriever. We are a registered therapy dog team and a crisis response team. Apollo and I have logged about 200 visits during the past 2 years, primarily at Hartford Hospital's Institute of Living where we visit the child and adolescent inpatient behavioral health units. We have also visited UCONN, St. Joes's and STA and on a rare occasion we get called out as a Crisis Response Team.

Some of you here have already met Apollo during our visits to STA. I'm going interactive here for a moment. Raise your hand if you have met Apollo? How did he make you feel? Can anyone share?

Wonderful! I've also gotten very positive feedback from the patients at the Institute of Living where Apollo and I visit twice a week. I have seen so many beautiful and loving interactions between Apollo and the patients along with immediate improvements in their mood. For confidentiality reasons, I can't share specific details of our visits.

However, there is one story that I am able to share with you that I hope will encourage you to ponder your own behavior and the difference you can make in someone's day by being kind. As I sat on the floor in the middle of the day room with Apollo and several teenagers on a routine visit to The Institute of Living, he was his normal charming self, offering gazes of compassion, friendly smiles, warm hugs and an occasional grunt which is his toned down method of asking for a treat. On this particular day, one teenager who was visiting with Apollo had met him the previous week. She was very excited to see him again and was encouraging the teen sitting next to her to hug Apollo.

Her efforts were not immediately successful until she finally blurted out, “IT’S LIKE HUGGING JESUS!!!!”. Wow, I thought, you can’t get a better compliment than that. So, what was it exactly that she meant? INTERACTIVE AGAIN, anyone have some insight to share about this?

Perhaps it is best explained through the words of the Recreation Therapist who oversees our weekly visits. I quote:

In Apollo’s time as a therapy dog, he has comforted hundreds of individuals, each carrying their own story – as we all do. Regardless of what we’ve been through, Apollo accepts us as we are, asks no questions and passes no criticisms. He sees the good in everyone and offers unconditional warmth, loyalty and comfort to all. Everyone who experiences Apollo’s kindness truly leaves a happier person.

Well done my friend you are truly living up to your name by spreading sunshine, promoting healing, howling to music and inspiring poetry. You are victorious. Here is your reward. (Offer him a treat)

Now, as I said before, I’m into the meaning of names. When I was pregnant with Nicole I didn’t search for names, I just had the name. But, I did research the meaning. I’ve found it defined in slightly different ways. Victorious Spirit and Victory of the People seem to be the most common definitions. I always preferred Victorious Spirit. I never understood “Victory of the People”; what people are they talking about.

Then, while preparing for today, I had an 'ah ha' moment and realized that by awarding scholarships to people who demonstrate Nicole's attributes of kindness, helpfulness and integrity with a warm smile and a faithful and happy heart that we are recognizing these attributes as victorious and demonstrating that Nicole is also true to her name. So, I challenge you to go forward and be victorious people by allowing others to experience your kindness and making a difference in their day.

Which leads me to this year's two recipients of the Nicole Noel Freda Memorial Scholarship:

First is a young lady who loves to read and among other things, is an honor student. She is thoughtful, compassionate and kind to all with a happy nature and warm smile.

Second is a young man who is a great teammate and friend and also an honor student. He is good natured, kind hearted and sees the best in everyone, even if they aren't showing it at the moment.

Congratulations XXXXX XXXXXXXX and XXXXXX XXXX.
